

## THE RELEVANCE OF GIDDENS' STRUCTURATION THEORY FOR ORGANIZATIONAL RESEARCH\*

ROBERTO ALBANO,  
UNIVERSITÀ DI TORINO

GIOVANNI MASINO  
UNIVERSITÀ DI FERRARA

BRUNO MAGGI  
UNIVERSITÀ DI BOLOGNA E UNIVERSITÀ DEGLI STUDI DI MILANO

### *Abstract*

Anthony Giddens' Structuration Theory is probably one of the sociological theories more directly referenced and more widely used, in a variety of ways, in organizational research. Why is that, and what does it mean for organizational research? In this paper we explore this issue by reviewing some early, influential contributions, within the organizational field, that used Giddens' theory as the main reference. We will show that the actual utilizations of such theory are very heterogeneous in many relevant concepts, although they are all moved by similar theoretical needs. We also propose that in order to properly answer to those needs, organizational research should focus on some key elements that, while being central in Giddens' contribution, are not always interpreted consistently by "Giddensian" organization scholars. Finally, we will argue that it is possible for the organization reflection, even when it is not built upon Structuration Theory, to share and realize Giddens' main "message" to the organizational discipline: the need for an organization theory truly based on an epistemological view that allows to overcome the objectivist / subjectivist dilemma.

### *Keywords*

Structuration theory, Organizational action, Organizational epistemology, Organizational change

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\*An early version of this paper was presented at the XIV World Congress of Sociology, Research Committee 17 (Sociology of Organization), Montreal (Canada), July 26<sup>th</sup> - August 1<sup>st</sup> 1998. A rielaboration in French is published in B. Maggi, 2003 (part 1 - De l'agir organisationnel: chap. 3; Portuguese ed. 2006; Spanish ed. 2009).

The relevance of Giddens' structuration theory for organizational research. Roberto Albano, Giovanni Masino, Bruno Maggi. Bologna: TAO Digital Library, 2010.

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ISBN: 978-88-904979-4-0



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# **The relevance of Giddens' Structuration Theory for organizational research**

*Roberto Albano, Università di Torino*

*Giovanni Masino, Università di Ferrara*

*Bruno Maggi, Università di Bologna e Università degli Studi di Milano*

## **Introduction**

Organizational studies have developed a remarkable interest in Giddens' Structuration Theory (1976, 1984). Some scholars look at Structuration Theory (ST) principally as a general frame of reference providing the required ontological and epistemological features needed to understand organization as a process. In this sense, ST is considered a valuable perspective mainly because it helps to grasp the dynamics of organizational replication and change.

Other authors refer to ST as a source of specific concepts (propositions and substantive hypothesis), regardless of the epistemological and the methodological framework that are implicit in their speculations. Thus, a heuristic usefulness is acknowledged to ST for studying specific organizational phenomena: technology, power and domination, communication and information systems, organizational culture and so on.

Finally, there are authors placed at the cross-road of such ways to look at the ST as a relevant scheme for organizational analysis.

The contributions of the authors that we considered in this critical review, prevalently coming from North American and British areas, have been published within a range of time that covers the eighties and nineties: Ranson, Hinings, Greenwood (1980), Riley (1983), Barley (1986; 1990), Barley, Tolbert (1997), Wilmott (1981; 1987), Orlikowski (1992), Orlikowski, Robey (1991), DeSanctis, Poole (1994), Leflaive (1996).

Even if these authors deal with different research issues, either from a theoretical or an empirical point of view, and even if there is a clear heterogeneity in the interpretations given to the ST itself, a common theme can

be clearly identified in both the dissatisfaction for the perspectives which traditionally guided most organizational studies, and the necessity to transcend their dualistic visions, especially the one concerning the relationship between structure and action.

Our paper proposes the following reflections.

- An overall interpretation of the reasons inducing a substantial number of organizational researchers to seek a new frame of reference, alternative to the traditional ones, i.e. objectivist and subjectivist approaches. Objectivist approaches draw the attention to organizational structures conceived as formal configuration of activities, and conceive action as being subordinate to the aprioristic structural constraints. Subjectivist approaches focus on motivations, personal experiences and sense-making of actors in interaction. An alternative to both these perspectives should incorporate structure and action in one theoretical framework, in order to explain how organizational structures change over time. We will also propose an interpretation of the reasons inducing scholars of a research field that is not exclusively sociological towards social theory.

- A review and a commentary of some relevant contributions, in order to highlight how ST has been transposed in organizational theory, with a peculiar concern for some topics that are salient for the conceptualization and understanding of organizational change. Considering the origin of ST, the discussion of these contributions needs to be referenced to the sociological field and to the organizational one as well.

- A selection of classical topics in organization studies to which ST can bring a contribution in the overcoming of the difficulties against which both subjectivist and objectivist approaches run up, concerning especially the interpretation and explanation of organizational change.

- Finally, we will argue that Giddens' ST can help organization theorists to conceptualize organizational phenomena in a way that is truly alternative, in epistemological terms, to mainstream approaches. In this respect, ST can

represent a useful epistemological comparison reference even for theories that are not based on it, like, for example, the Theory of Organizational Action (*Teoria dell'Agire Organizzativo*, TAO), proposed by Bruno Maggi (1984/1990; 2003). This theory, while not based on Giddens' work, shares with ST the key elements that define and position both ST and TAO in clear epistemological opposition to social and organizational mainstream theories.

The choice of the contributions reviewed, other than obviously depending from our bounded knowledge of this literature, takes into account some criteria of "relevance" related to the goals of our analysis. We have considered those articles in which the authors examine:

- their attitudes toward ST;
- their expectations from sociological theory;
- the degree of satisfaction (or dissatisfaction) of expectations generated by ST, in comparison with other general frames proposed in the sociological speculation;
- their translation into organizational terms of ST as a whole, or of some parts of it, either epistemological or substantive.

Brief and vague references to Giddens' scheme, without a minimum of analysis and examination of how to transpose ST to an external field of studies, will be ignored in this paper.

### **Theoretical needs and shared elements in "Giddensian" organizational contributions**

The first task of our survey of the "Giddensian" research stream in organizational studies is a descriptive one. The main question is: what does characterize, in its general features, this research stream? More precisely: what are the common traits, somehow related to Giddens' Theory, of the above-mentioned numerous and heterogeneous contributions of theory and research? We believe that a possible answer should be articulated in some fundamental points:

First, the common reference by these authors to a conceptual outline, coming from a field that is external to organizational theory, must be emphasized. This fact requires a brief but necessary comment.

In defining social theory as an “external” field, we do not mean “unrelated” or “not appropriated”. It is worth calling the attention to the fact that organizational thinking, traditionally and for the type of the research object itself, is interdisciplinary in character. Several branches of social sciences have considerably contributed to the organizational reflection and, at the same time, they have been enriched by it. Most social phenomena take place in every single organization as well as in the whole societal system. As a consequence, the understanding of organizational action is strictly linked to the understanding of societal environment; on the other side, organization theory provides a significant contribution to sociology for several substantive issues.

Indeed, for a long time, organizational thought has absorbed some of the main conceptual frames coming from social theory, while organization theory itself has produced autonomous frames for the study of organizations as social systems, some of which have later been used by social theory.

Thus, we think that the emphasis on the permeability between autonomous theoretical fields shifts the interpretation of concepts like structure and action to a more general level of discussion. Indeed, this is precisely what most of the already mentioned authors do: they not only refer to ST, but also to other sociological theories. There is no doubt that the discussion about the limits of traditional perspectives in organization analysis is thusly enriched, but also the complexity of the discussion is increased.

An analysis of the advantages and the disadvantages ST can bring to the study of organizations cannot be disconnected from a reflection at the level of social theory itself, and from a precise comparison with other conceptions of social action and social systems. We shall come back to this subject when we consider how appropriate the explicit and implicit references to this external field are.

A second set of common goals that can be found among the “Giddensians” lies within the organizational thought itself. It concerns the shared discontent for the traditional perspectives of organizational theory.

We argued in the previous point that exchanges between social theory and a relevant part of the organization discipline has brought to the latter several perspectives that the epistemological debate has produced in the former. However, it must be said that up to now, (orthodox) organization theory has been dominated by *some* of these perspectives. Since the beginning of the XXth century, the prevailing conception of the organizational phenomena was objectivist, i.e. oriented by knowledge strategies which are deeply embedded in positivism and neo-positivism in methodological terms.

Within this conception can be located, for example, the structural-functional school, which provided functional explanations, a strategy borrowed from biological sciences. Functionalism, in a large sense, is still the most important perspective in organization field, as far as the quantitative proportion of theorization and empirical research is concerned. Together with functionalism, perspectives aimed to (neo)positivistic explanations have a large diffusion.

These perspectives, actually much more differentiated than it can appear from this synthetic picture, share the common goal of discovering the “general laws” which govern organizational *facts*, neglecting from their investigation domain the *sense* that intentional agents attribute to the organizational action in which they participate.

Since the second half of seventies of the XXth Century, objectivist interpretations of organization have been contrasted by subjectivist ones, which have acquired an increasing degree of popularity among scholars; they aim to a description and a direct comprehension of the organization as it is experienced in the everyday life by the actors, and of the sense they attribute to their interactions. These proposals, deeply-rooted in the phenomenological sociology (especially the sociology of knowledge), had a particular success.

Organizations, like every social system, are seen as socially constructed by the actors. As such, the meaning of organization can be fully grasped by the researcher *ex post facto*, because only during and after the (inter)actions actors make sense of them.

Certainly both objectivist and subjectivist conceptions highlighted salient aspects of organization; however, their reification of organization generates an irreconcilable opposition between the structural elements and the intentionality of agents. Structure is usually conceived as an external reality, relatively fixed and enduring.

Structure(s) holds supremacy on action in the objectivist conception. It is conceived as the set of the formalized prescriptive roles, procedures, tasks, hierarchical relations: in brief, structure is an entity preceding and molding actions of individuals (or even their personalities).

On the contrary, the subjectivist conception assigns the primacy to action. Structure is conceived as patterned regularities and processes of interaction: in other words, structure is an unintended (by)product resulting from the countless day-to-day interactions, an interpretative “strait-jacket” against which an actor aware of its socially constructed being tries to preserve his/her autonomy.

At the origin of the “Giddensian” organizational contributions there is the necessity, that the authors make clear, to avoid both the imperialism of the strategic actor on the institutional contest, with the related extreme indeterminism, and the opposite rigid determinist vision. The need of such overcoming reveals itself most clearly when one wants to investigate the conditions under which organizational changes take place.

A third common point is the shared belief that ST provides a solution to the limits of the traditional perspectives, especially “*the unhelpful contrasting of structure and action*” (Ranson, Hinings, Greenwood, 1980). The necessary condition in order to fill the gap between structure and action is to incorporate them into a “more unified methodological and theoretical framework”. It



should be recognized, as Giddens proposes, that knowledgeable agents produce and reproduce structure within the praxis of their social life, and that the structural proprieties are at the same time the constraining and enabling media of action.

These authors reject the dualism implied in those perspectives that reify structure and action, as they prefer a conception and an interpretative schema capable to set structure and action in a relation of mutual constitution.

### **Why does Structuration Theory appear as a useful approach to some organizational theorists?**

Before discussing some of the main contributions of the cited authors, it can be useful to add to the previous description of the “Giddensian” organizational wave an interpretation of the reasons that, in our opinion, have driven those scholars toward ST. Again, we shall subdivide our argument into three points, while remaining at a very general level of analysis.

a) Since Max Weber (1922a), organization has been conceptualized on several occasions by authoritative contributions as a specific kind of social action. Conversely, it has been largely recognized that social action, especially when it assumes the characteristics of collective action, must be in some degree an organized one. Starting from this definition, organization theory can refer back to the considerable and noteworthy epistemological, substantive and methodological reflections which have taken place in the wide field of social science. The fact that organizational theory refers to this wider debate, appears therefore not only pertinent but even necessary; in its absence, every new proposal of theoretical and interpretative scheme would certainly appear as “amateurish”.

Besides these general matters, organization theory shares with other areas of social science a peculiar interest for the theme of structure, especially in terms of its variability and its relationship with action. This topic is indeed a crucial one for the comprehension and the explanation of organizational or any

societal change. In this sense, one of the earliest and fundamental “Giddensian” articles in the organizational field is paradigmatic, that of Ranson, Hinings, Greenwood (1980). The article begins by identifying of the issue of “*explaining how organizational structures change over time*” as the main conceptual problem to be solved.

b) Giddens highlights merits and limitations of both objectivist and subjectivist perspectives in their conceptualization of social systems morphogenesis. The former draws all attention on the structural constraints which limit the range of options for the individuals; moreover, it denies individuals a significant capability of conscious monitoring, and therefore the ability to control their own behavior. The latter chooses the way of extreme indeterminism, denying that structures would have in any sense a reality of their own, except a symbolic one; structures in other terms are completely situated in the actors’ mental processes.

The objectivist rules out a relevant active role of the individuals - i.e. to be autonomous and creative - in the reproduction of social systems; thus, this interpretative scheme is deprived of an essential requisite for the understanding of innovation and consequent changes: the intentional rationality of agents.

The subjectivist conceptualization emphasizes how actors produce social reality, but this process - prevalently non-intentional in character - tends to objectify itself. Moreover, the subjectivist perspective moves from a naive idealism, as it understands the agent’s capability to question the “taken-for-granted” as a manifestation of spontaneous conscience. This perspective loses sight, therefore, of precious elements for the understanding of social change: the relational nature of power, the character of intentionality that can be found in collective action, the historically development and co-evolution of psychogenesis and socio-genesis, and so on.

The dichotomy between objectivist / subjectivist perspectives is accepted as an interpretive key of organizational thought in the contributions we will review in this paper. At the same time, such dichotomy is understood as an

opposition that needs to be overcome with a new conception that unifies the analysis of structure and action. The first authors within the organizational field who refer to ST in such a way are Ranson, Hinings, Greenwood (1980). They identify the definition of structure as the crucial point of dispute between the two perspectives: in the objectivist one, structure is understood as the formal configuration of roles and procedures, in other words, the prescribed framework of organization; the subjectivist one, on the other hand, conceives structure as the patterned regularities and processes of interaction. The former concentrates on the formal constraints and on the control of action, whereas the latter calls the attention on the informal structure, i.e. on what people actually do, on their possibility in displacing goals and subverting prescribed roles. Both conceptions emphasize salient aspects for the comprehension and understanding of organizational phenomena, but they fail to account for the issues highlighted by the rival approach. Then, organization theory needs a new frame of reference, one that would allow to understand both kinds of matters.

Our analysis identifies *two modalities* of satisfying this need, i.e. two interpretations of Giddens' proposal: some authors propose to overcome the dualism by linking traditional subjectivist and objectivist perspectives into a *broader new framework*; others propose to overcome the dualism through a *third conception*, alternative to the traditional ones.

c) Some of the organizational contributions interpret ST according to a syncretistic approach, a cross-fertilization between the theoretical and empirical outcomes of the two perspectives that traditionally have occupied social theory and, as a consequence, organizational theory. They refer to ST as a theoretical locus in which the link of two classes of topics is fostered: structures as formal configurations and structures as patterned regularities.

Another interpretation considers ST as the overcoming of the reifying conceptualization of structure. Incidentally, it must be recalled that a "third epistemological way" for the study of social action had been identified by Max

Weber within the *Methodenstreit* (Weber, 1922b).

In both interpretations, the significance of connecting action and structure is stressed, by avoiding to make the former a simple epiphenomenon of the latter and vice versa.

Now, we need to examine some topics treated by the considered authors more in detail, in order to grasp the differences between the two interpretive keys of ST. The first work to analyze in detail is that, already cited, of Ranson and colleagues. It was followed by the brief but important critique of Wilmott (1981), by which the author outlines a different interpretation of Giddens' Theory.

The subsequent contributions aiming to an utilization of ST in organizational field refer (explicitly, for the most part) to one of these two seminal articles; however, it can be said that the interpretation of Ranson and colleagues seems to be the most diffused one. Given the heterogeneity of the examined contributions, we adopt a very selective scheme of reading, related to general but salient issues both for ST and organization theory. In the following paragraphs we will examine:

- the understanding of organizational change;
- the type of rationality underlying the individual's choices and, as a consequence, the collective decisions and actions;
- the concepts of structure and structuration

### **Organizational change**

The focus on organizational change is common among "Giddensian" authors. Indeed, they share a critical standpoint toward traditional approaches. On one side, positivist and objectivist approaches face the issue of organizational change by proposing deterministic relationships between the structural change and exogenous (environmental and technological) contingencies. The concept of "change" is not different, in this case, from "passive adaptation". On the other side, subjectivist approaches conceive

change as an erratic phenomenon, something that cannot be referred to a systemic logic since there's no possibility to intentionally design or guide change. Thus, change is seen as an unpredictable phenomenon, emerging from the aggregation and the interaction of individual strategies and behaviors. A critical analysis of such traditional approaches reveals two fundamental theoretical necessities, which we will discuss separately:

**A)** a need to grasp and interpret the two aspects within the same analytical framework: both the influence of exogenous factors, and the influence of individual strategies. The problem is not that of a separate explanation of such aspects, but their connection within a complete and unified framework.

**B)** a need to understand the intentional dimension of organizational change, that is, the ability of key actors to design and change organization in a instrumental way toward goals (which are variable as well). This aspect is almost ignored in the positivist tradition - or, it is reduced to general laws of adaptation, so that not much is said about "intentionality" conceived as contextual and proactive action of change. Similarly, the same aspect is ignored in the subjectivist tradition too - or, it is reduced to the individual strategy level, since the consequences for the whole organization are indeterminated and unpredictable as well.

Giddensians' contributions show an important aspect. While the first need (A) is widely recognized, the second one (B) is much less shared.

**A)** Some authors use the ST in order to *integrate* the two traditional approaches. According to Orlikowski and Robey (1991) "*the structuration perspective by synthesizing objective and subjective elements of social phenomena .. because structuration serves as a meta-theory, it does not preempt existing theories [of organization] .. rather, structuration theory provides a higher level of synthesis that permits us to see the connection between ongoing human activities, social processes, contexts of use, and enduring social structures.*". Thus, ST is not seen as an alternative approach, but a sort of irenics which reconciles the two conflicting traditional perspectives. According to these authors, ST does not substitute the

old perspectives, instead it helps to accept and connect them at a higher level of abstraction. Other authors share the same view. Ranson and colleagues (1980), for example, were the first ones to propose the use of ST in the organizational field as a link between adaptation theories and indetermination theories. Their proposal is based on Giddens' idea of structure's duality. According to their interpretation, duality means contemporary presence of different explanations of structural variability. According to an adaptation logic, technological and environmental contingencies impact upon structure in terms of change of its formal configuration, which in turns influences individual behavior by providing a major constraint to action. On the other side, agents interact according to "provinces of meaning" and "dependencies of power", institutionalizing the practices as formalized relationships and procedures, that is, as constraints for future actions. As a whole, the process of organizational change results from the interaction of changes concerning shared meanings, power relationships, formal structures and exogenous contingencies. The authors affirm that *"This more unified methodological and theoretical framework allows us to incorporate a number of ostensibly disparate perspectives: phenomenological perspectives .. traditional ahistorical organizational analysis of structural regularities .. and broader sociohistorical perspectives of economy and culture"*. Thus, they affirm the relevance of ST as a meta-framework comprising syncretically different traditions, where conceptual differences are dissolved.

Wilmott (1981) radically criticized the organizational reading of ST proposed by Ranson and other authors. According to Wilmott, the duality of structure as proposed by Giddens is not compatible with a syncretic linkage of the traditional perspectives. On the contrary, ST is to be seen as an alternative, epistemologically different approach. The crucial problem is not to connect theories with different epistemological backgrounds, but with different analytical levels, the agency level and the structural level. Structure is to be conceived as a set of properties giving a dynamic order to social practices and reproduced through action. Thus, the concept of duality serves to "locate" at

the analytical level the distinction between the realm of agency and the realm of structure. In a subsequent work, Wilmott (1987) proposes to use ST in order to analyze managerial work, in particular to appreciate how “ .. *the social practices that constitute managerial work can be studied as the skilled accomplishment of agents and as an expression of the structural properties of systems of interaction*”.

Other authors use ST in a way similar to Wilmott's proposal. Riley (1983), working on organizational culture, adopts ST in order to propose something completely different from traditional functionalist and interpretive readings. The author uses Giddens' work as an alternative approach for studying social change. Riley states that “*Structures exist only in their instantiation, and while systems may be conceptually analyzed, they do not exist in any concrete or 'real' sense as in the functionalist paradigm. Neither is the perspective purely interpretive, since individuals are the creators and carriers of structures that are generated via rules and resources .. Structuration theory, however, crosses the boundary between radical humanism and radical structuralism by its emphasis on deep economic and political structures in institutional analysis*”. Riley emphasizes the usefulness of the ST in order to combine within a unified framework organizational change and replication : “*The simultaneous impact of individual and institutional influences leads to a situation in which the bias for 'what has come before' is transformed, and a change in the structuring process occurs. A central concern of structuration theory, therefore, is the identification of the conditions that govern the continuity - or transformation - of structures, and thus the reproduction of systems*”.

Leflaive (1996), in his contribution about power dynamics within organizations, sees organization as a reflexive system. For this reason, the author suggests to abandon the concept of power both as an attribute and as an element coming from the asymmetry of actors related to the control of information. Instead, building on ST, he proposes to conceive it as a collective capacity of the organizational process itself, a capacity to maintain and transform the organization. The surveillance processes are at the same time constituted and constitutive of the organization and of members as subjects

exercising power, and so they are open to both resistance and change.

We can summarize the discussion by emphasizing a shared need and two ways to interpret it. The shared need is to grasp organizational change in a more comprehensive way compared to what traditional approaches propose. The two interpretations of such necessity seem to be very different. The first one utilizes ST as a meta-theory connecting and comprehending syncretically theories with antithetical epistemological background. The second one sees ST as an actual alternative to traditional approaches, epistemologically and ontologically different from them.

**B)** The second need that we identified, related to the intentionality implied in organizational changes, is much less diffused and shared between “Giddensian” authors. On the one side, this can be partially explained if one considers the lesser emphasis that Giddens himself put on the intentional consequences of action (compared to unintentional consequences), even if he comprises them in his analytical framework. This is partially due to the scope of ST as a general theory of social action. On the other side, we think that such lack of attention by “Giddensian” organization scholars may be a limit. We argue that a primary task of organization theorists interested in ST should be the evaluation of its usefulness when applied to a research field where the relevance of intentional change is crucial. Moreover, this should be even more relevant since traditional organization theories do not deal with intentional change through “*satisficing* solutions” (to say it with Simon's words): either in terms of unlimited capacity of intervention guided by objective rationality, passive adaptation, or as an indeterminate process. Barley and Tolbert (1997) briefly talk about the issue of the structural change as an intentional outcome of actions. However, they claim that intentional change must be triggered by contextual and/or exogenous changes in order to actually take place, otherwise the unintentional aspect prevails. Thus, they don't seem to have a different approach from subjectivist theories. The authors state that : “.. *we believe that contextual change .. changes in technology, cross-cultural contacts, economic*



*downturns and similar events .. is usually necessary before actors can assemble the resources and rationales that are necessary for collectively questioning scripted patterns of behavior. In the absence of contextual change, actors are more likely to replicate scripted behavior, and it is this propensity that makes institutions so persistent".* Thus, we can notice again a syncretic approach to ST, since they propose a combination of two ideas of change: the first as adaptation to exogenous shocks, and the second as the unpredictable outcome of a legitimization and sedimentation process of recurrent behaviors guided by individual strategies.

De Sanctis and Poole (1994), using concepts taken from ST in order to study the relationships between technology and structure, indirectly refer to the intentionality of structural change. The authors state that the appropriation process of technology by actors is guided by intentionality. So the structure, as in Barley and Tolbert, can change only when the technical change, intentionally appropriated or not, triggers a transformation of social relationships. The intentional action reveals its relevance only in the appropriation process of technology, so the consequences on the structural change are only indirect and unintentional.

Thus, comparing these major contributions, it can be said that the issue of the intentional change is almost ignored. However, a better reflection about this topic can be proposed if we consider a second interpretive key of "Giddensian" organizational contributions, which starts from a reflection about the concept of rationality.

### **Agency and rationality**

The way human (and organizational) rationality is conceived deeply influences the theorization of structure and agency relationship and structural change. Giddens, indeed, give to his "stratification model of agent" a central role in ST. "Giddensian" authors, instead, do not show a significant emphasis on such aspect. More precisely, three issues can be distinguished. First, several authors do not consider the concept of rationality as a problematic one. Second,

it seems that a conscious effort to “translate” Giddens’ theory of agent into the organizational field is lacking. Third, it seems difficult to trace the theory of agent and rationality implicitly proposed by “Giddensian” authors. Barley and Tolbert (1997), for example, explicitly put aside such aspect by stating that “.. by choosing to focus on the identification and analysis on scripts in our approach, we have consciously emphasized the behavioral and the structural rather than the cognitive and the cultural”. The authors’ approach is directly finalized to the analysis of the connection between agency and structure rather than to define the concept of rationality on which the agents’ behavior and choices are based. Similarly, all other organizational authors either seem not to consider such aspect as a relevant one, or they just directly refer to Giddens’ theory and use it “as is”.

We argue that this lack of attention can lead to under-estimate the relevance of intentionality related to structural change. Also, it can lead to ignore the connection between individual and organizational rationality. Such connection, in a theory of organizational structure’s duality, is a very relevant one and it must be analytically explicated. Do “Giddensian” approaches “deny” the existence of a systemic rationality (as proposed by the subjectivist tradition), or do they propose a functional rationality (as proposed by functionalist theories), or do they propose instead something completely different? The “Giddensian” contributions that we analyzed do not provide an answer to this crucial question. We think that until this point is not cleared, the way ST can be useful to organizational reflection cannot be clear as well.

### **Structure, duality and dualism**

While the concepts of rationality and agent have not been extensively elaborated, the concept of structure received much attention from “Giddensian” authors. The goal of Ranson and colleagues (1980) related to structure is similar to the one concerning structural variability. While for variability their idea is to propose a synthesis between the sources of variability identified by objectivist and subjectivist approaches, in the same way the authors propose a conceptual

synthesis between the structure seen as formal configuration and as institutionalization of recurrent interactions. The synthesis is allowed by a conceptual connection represented by the general idea of structure as means of control, continuously produced and reproduced in action, constituted by and constitutive of action. Thus, they try to grasp both the formal aspect of structure, as an enabling and constraining premise to action in terms of expectations and prescriptions, and the actual configurations of interactions, as they are, in turns, constitutive of the formal framework. In this way, the authors grasp the duality of structure in the biunivocal relationship between formal and informal elements of structure.

Barley and Tolbert (1997) propose a recursive model of the action - structure relationship based on ST. The crucial premise is represented by the analytical and also *phenomenological* distinction between action and structure: *“Unless institutions and actions are analytically as well as phenomenologically distinct, it is difficult to understand how one can be said to affect the other .. Unless an institution exist prior to action, it is difficult to understand how it can affect behavior and how one can examine its implications for action or speak of action’s subsequent affects on the institution. Thus, to reduce the empirical problem of conflating action and institutions, one needs a diachronic model of the structuration process”*. Thus, the empirical problem concerning the study of the structuration process as a dual process must be shifted, according to the authors, to a conceptual level. Indeed, the proposed model has a diachronic nature, since the action realm and the structural realm influence each other in different and distinguishable moments through a mediation mechanism called “script”. Thus, it is possible to criticize the contributions of Ranson and Barley in a similar way: if one conceives structure as a set of formal rules *and* typified behaviors, or if one shifts to the phenomenological level the distinction between agency and structure, the risk of reifying the concept of structure can be rather high. That is, in other words, the risk of a syncretic approach to ST in the organizational field. In Ranson’s contribution, the syncretism can be seen in the attempt to synthesize

conceptions that are epistemologically and ontologically distant. In Barley's contribution, it can be seen in the concrete separation (in space and time) - and not only an analytical separation - of action and structure.

De Sanctis and Poole (1994) detect the double existence of structures in the social system and in technologies, structures that are to be conceived as "*rules and resources provided by technologies and institutions as the basis for human activity .. [they]serve as templates for planning and accomplishing tasks*". Also, there is a recursive relationship between them, since they "*iteratively shape each other*". Also, the authors identify other "sources" of structuration besides technology, like the social environment, the system of tasks, the embedded culture and so forth. This contribution can be fruitfully compared to the Barley's works on technology (1986; 1990), where technology is seen as a source of structuring that impacts on social structures. Also, De Sanctis and Poole emphasize the study of structural features implied in technology, and show the possibility of mutual influence between social and technological structures. The basic principle, however, is similar in the two contributions: the ST is used to explain the bidirectional relationship between different sources of structuration, between different structural "objects" that can be distinguished not analytically, but in concrete terms.

Another interesting comparison can be made between the works of Orlikowski (1992), Orlikowski and Robey (1991) and Wilmott (1987). According to the former ones, structure can be analyzed according to different structuration "modalities", directly borrowed from Giddens' work itself. The idea of "modality" represents the connection between the action realm and the structural realm, thus creating a synthetic framework informed by ST as a meta-theory. Wilmott, instead, defines structure as a set of structural properties of the social system. Thus, structural modalities do not serve as a connection between the two realms, but as a characterization of the structural properties: "*The modalities appear as the structural properties of social systems, as expression of signification, domination and legitimization .. [they] are understood to be drawn upon*

*by actors in the production of interaction. And, at the same time, they are the media of the reproduction of the structural components of systems of interaction”.*

Other authors proposed interpretations not much different from Wilmott's. Riley (1983), for example, states that : *“Structuration .. is the production and reproduction of social systems through the application of generative rules and resources. In this sense, systems are regularized relations in interaction - not functional relationships between parts of a whole .. there is a bias for ‘what has come before’, since structures that have been previously drawn upon become part of the stores of knowledge available and are themselves reproduced”.* Thus, the author is careful not to interpret structure neither as functional relationships between separate organizational parts (for example, between formal prescriptions and typified behaviors, as Ranson and colleagues proposed), nor as a phenomenological separation of agency and structural levels (as Barley and Tolbert proposed). Instead, Riley maintains an analytical distinction, since structure represents an important knowledge premise, only partially conscious, to structural reproduction or change through action. Leflaive (1996) holds a similar position, as he states that: *“Mundane organizational operations .. are sources of information and knowledge. They are used by inmates as resources to constitute themselves as selves, and to exert some sort of power. At the same time, they sustain the process of constitution of their organizational setting (both as a concrete locale and as an institution)”.*

### **A general comment about “Giddensian” organizational contributions**

It must be said that, in general, these contributions do not constitute an homogeneous stream which could be labeled “structurationist theory of organization”. Heterogeneity concerns not only the specific character of the various research issues, but also the general interpretation of the framework proposed by Giddens.

From this point of view, we have already stressed the emergence of two interpretation modes of ST, which for simplicity we label respectively as “cross-

*fertilization*" and *"third way"*.

The two interpretative modes of ST are not always clearly distinguishable in the domain of any single contribution; neither these modes characterize unequivocally the positions of each author. However, our goal is not to classify the reviewed contributions. We propose this distinction just in ideal-typical terms, in order to let emerge how ST can be fruitfully used in the organizational field.

In the first interpretation, ST is placed at the same level of other action theories belonging to the two perspectives criticized by Giddens: meeting points are looked for, without regard to the different underlying epistemologies. In this eclectic approach, a reference to ST is made in order to stress both the importance of the institutional constraints on individual action and the capability of actors to avoid constraints and to modify institutions. Objectivist and subjectivist perspectives are therefore considered to be complementary and compatible, unlike those who assert the methodological dualism and their absolute incompatibility.

In the second interpretation, which is the most consistent to the original "spirit" of ST, the importance of a dual vision of structure is emphasized. Structure is intended both as a medium and as an outcome of social praxis. Every act of production of the societal system is at the same time an act of reproduction: the same rules and the resources which constrain and render action possible, are reproduced through action itself (this is called by Giddens the "recursive character" of social life). This "third way" is considered by its supporters more useful in order to understand organizational change than the dualistic conceptions, which reify agency and structure and situate them in a (logical or temporal) hierarchical relation; but it is also alternative to any attempt to put reified structures and actions in a relation of reciprocal causation. The epistemological differences underlying the different theoretical schemes are emphasized, and convergence is searched only among theories that originate within the same conception.

## **What does organization theory need in order to go along the path indicated by Structuration Theory?**

In organizational thought the need of a new epistemological and theoretical frame is widely recognized. This is the fundamental need which, in our opinion, pushed a significant number of scholars toward ST. However, the cultural conditioning of the traditional perspectives is still strong.

The result of such influence is, in the worst cases, the loss of the original Giddens' conceptualization about the duality of structure, and the regression to the old dualism, typical of the perspectives that one may wish to overcome.

We try now to identify some fundamental issues which should characterize a true "third way", as opposed to a simple revival, however updated in the language, of the two traditional modes.

1a) A "model of man" as autonomous agent (see Hollis, 1977), competent in his social action and, at least partially, of its effects; in this conception agents are self-monitoring, purposeful and responsible; their agency is not passively determined by exogenous factors.

1b) A definition of rationality *à la* Simon (1947), that is, intentional and bounded in character. If in the previous point we have identified the purposive character of organizational action, here we add the limits in which incurs this competence, without surrendering to the conception of organization as a total unintended product of agents in interactions.

2) A process conception of organization, suitable for considering both morphostatic and morphogenetic processes.

3) A particular attention to the concepts of "rule" and "regulation" and to the relation existing between the understanding of rules and the conformity to them. We want to underline particularly the following sides of regulation:

- attention must be paid not to the formal rules alone, but to the whole spectrum of rules involved in agency, i.e. formal and informal, tacit and discursive, and so forth; a traditional issue of organizational theory, i.e. the

interpretation of structural variability, is strictly connected to this point;

- the reference to the rules and their interpretation, apart from their codification modes, is always local and transitory in character. The negotiation of local orders carried out by agents lead us to consider the domination and power relations which characterize every organizational process.

4) A concept of structure as a product of intentional actions, which assumes an analytic autonomy from the strategic action and which makes possible the institutional analysis without neglecting the ability of agents to produce changes intentionally, even when they enact the more routinized praxis.

5) A weberian interpretative scheme of the organizational action and of its structure. The salient features of such a frame have been partially outlined in the previous points. Indeed, Weber conceives organization as:

- a specific mode of *social action (soziales Handeln)*, i.e. an action which in terms of its meaning, as intended by the acting subject, is related to the conduct of others and thereby oriented in its course;

- characterized, in its ideal typical form, by bounded rationality and goal-orientation;

- regulative system of collective action.

We also believe that it is important to accept the methodological suggestion which Weber identify as the basis of the study of any type of social action. In this respect we need to refer directly to the Weber's *Wissenschaftslehre* (doctrine of science) (1922b), in which social science is defined as "science of reality".

Weber opposed to both the application in social sciences of the positivistic canons of the knowledge doctrine (science of law) and to the total renunciation of any type of explanation of the social phenomena in favour of an idiographic approach.

In the science of reality there is room for both the understanding (*Verstehen*) of the subjectively intended meaning of an action and for the



explanation (*Erklärung*) of the social phenomena through objective and checkable procedures. *Verstehen* and *Erklärung* are both necessary. The former is not to understand merely as empathetic participation; even though empathy is often an important starting point, especially when an emotional context is involved, it is not sufficient for the evidence of understanding: it demands a rational, and intersubjectively valid, reconstruction of the action-elements in their context of meaning.

The scientific check of the interpretative procedures do not occur through the explanation modes of positivistic source, but through procedures of causal imputation, based on "judgement of objective possibility" (*objektive Möglichkeitsurteile*) and on the distinction between "adequate causation" (*adäquate Verursachung*) and "accidental causation" (*zufällige Verursachung*).

More in detail, according to the Weber's methodological arguments:

- the causes of a social phenomenon are always countless; the researcher selects the salient causal conditions referring to its own values-orientation (*Wertbezogenheit*);

- the studied objects can be interchanged in their roles of causes and effects in an alternative explanatory scheme;

- the causal relation is always understood in a non-deterministic way, indeed as objective possibility, separated from the estimation of the likelihood of such a possibility;

- explanation does not merely consist in finding empirical statistical regularities, but involves highlighting of the modes by which the objective conditions become effective causes through the intentional and self-monitoring action of individuals.

Is it possible to build an organizational theory that, while not being based on ST, does include all the above mentioned theoretical and methodological aspects? In other words, is it possible to share Giddens' epistemological "challenge" to social science and to organization theory in particular, and to build an organization theory within its disciplinary tradition that meets that

challenge? We believe it is possible to do so. In fact, there are relevant examples of such endeavor. One of them is the Theory of Organizational Action (TAO, Maggi 1984/1990; 2003). Although TAO does not build upon ST as a main reference, nonetheless it shows how organizational theory can share with ST those key features that define its position in the epistemological panorama of possibilities. More specifically, as said by Maggi (2003), TAO shares with ST the following points: a common reference to a “third” epistemological vision; a common conceptualization of structure as both the condition and the consequence of action; finally, the fact that ST helps to reinforce the perspective of TAO as a theory of social action.

## **Conclusion**

Our understanding of the relevance of the ST for the study of organizational change, presented in this paper, is an integral part of a wider project. Besides the points here discussed, the project includes:

- a critical comparison of Giddens’ Theory with other important theories of social action which could be useful for organizational analysis;
- a new interpretation of some classical contributions of organization theory.

We believe that it is necessary to look back as well as it is important to look ahead. What really matters is to look from a good position: someone would suggest doing it “on the shoulders of giants”.

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